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RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 6251  
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SUBJECT: ELN MILITARY ACTIONS AND AREA OF OPERATIONS  
SHRINKING

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¶1. Summary: Local security experts and peace advocates said ELN attacks against the GOC fell over 90 percent from 2002-2006. The ELN's geographic area of operations also shrank dramatically. The experts voiced hope that the ELN's fading military capacity would make the group ready for peace negotiations. End Summary.

¶2. On October 12, Corporacion Nuevo Arco Iris Director Leon Valencia and Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) director Jorge Restrepo held a conference on "Thinking Strategically About the ELN Negotiation Process." Restrepo, Valencia and other security experts concluded that ELN military and terrorist activity has fallen sharply in recent years. ELN attacks against the Colombian military dropped from nearly 200 in 2002 to approximately 80 in 2006; kidnappings fell from 331 in 2003 to 63 in 2006; and overall attacks against the GOC declined from 400 in 2001 to 23 in ¶2006. ELN activities continued to decline in 2007. By comparison, CERAC and ICG said FARC attacks against the military peaked in 2004 with over 600 recorded. The number fell to 395 in 2006.

¶3. The experts noted that unlike the FARC and ex-paramilitaries, the ELN did not try to inflict large-scale civilian casualties, including massacres, although it frequently resorted to mass kidnappings. Similarly, CERAC highlighted that the ELN did not use assassination as a primary tactic as did the FARC. A recently released International Crisis Group (ICG) report supports the view that ELN military capacity and its geographic area of operation have declined sharply since 2002. ICG speculates that this might make the group more open to peace negotiations with the GOC.

¶4. Valencia and Restrepo said the ELN's area of geographic operations previously stretched in an arc from the southern Pacific coast across the Andes to the northeast, including areas of Cordoba, Sucre, Choco and Huila departments. GOC and FARC pressure have now reduced the ELN to operating along the border with Venezuela (Norte del Santander and Arauca) and the far-southwest (Valle de Cauca, Cauca, Narino). They said the ELN is concentrating forces and avoiding combat. Restrepo and Valencia speculated that the low level of ELN activity in 2007 and their concentration of troops may signify a desire to commit to a peace process. Still, Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo, Senate President Nancy

Patricia Gutierrez and others are pessimistic the ELN will be able to reach the internal consensus needed to achieve a peace deal (reftel).

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